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ABSTRACT

A major reason for the public's concern about curriculum and instruction at all levels of education has evolved because of the serious decline in student academic achievement. After two decades of innovation in teaching styles there are increasing complaints about academic grade inflation, functional illiteracy, and student inability to read, write, and compute with ease and/or accuracy. Rather than placing blame for this phenomenon on teachers, the effects of innovative methodology, permissive attendance policies, and lower academic standards should be examined. Open door admissions to community colleges need not be accompanied by lowered academic standards if teachers present course material in a highly organized, moderately paced manner, using testing that is both objective and subjective, and realistic grading. Remedial instruction should be reserved for extremely high risk students, with honors classes for those of superior ability. Such academic upgrading would increase student performance, raise public confidence, and give respect to college diplomas, thus benefiting both non-traditional and traditional students. When all students are learning substantive material taught by serious, concerned teachers, they will be inspired to higher levels of achievement. (Author/RT)

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ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND THE UNDERPREPARED STUDENT IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Compared with the heady days of the 1960's, when community colleges and their enrollments were increasing at phenomenal rates, the latter 1970's find these institutions and higher education in general in a far less enviable position. During the earlier period the public rarely questioned the educational philosophy, management and accomplishments of these institutions. Today these areas are being questioned from all sides. While the 1960's was a period when government at all levels was willing and able to support higher education almost without limit, the late 1970's finds government not only in financially more difficult circumstances; it is also seriously questioning many of the instruction and curricular changes that have taken place during the last two decades. For these and for many more reasons, community colleges, as a part of higher education, are now facing a less optimistic future than would have seemed possible a few years ago.

Certainly a major reason for the public's concern about the curriculum and instruction at virtually all levels of education has evolved because of the serious decline in the academic achievement levels of students at both pre and post secondary educational institutions. Gustavo A. Mellander, President of Passaic County Community College in New Jersey, is rightfully disturbed that academic standards at far too many

community colleges have declined, in some cases drastically, in recent years. He points out that community college adherents "tell us in quasimystical language that these institutions are part of a growing 'movement' with a 'mission' to provide 'service' to all who come through our doors."[1] Mellander argues that a general deterioration of academic standards has tended to erode public confidence in its support for community colleges (he admits this is also true for the public schools and for many four-year institutions of higher education as well). There is serious concern that "at every level of education complaints are more and more frequent about academic grade inflation, functional illiteracy, and student inability to read, write and compute with any real ease or accuracy."[2]

Mellander's complaint has become almost universal. One does not have to look at the recently mandated Florida State-wide test scores of eleventh graders, where over thirty-five percent of these students could not pass seventh and eighth grade literacy tests, to recognize the seriousness of this problem. A public statement by Florida Commissioner of Education Ralph Furlington has pointed out that the disappointing results of these literacy tests have brought about more public interest and support for education in Florida than any previous happening, including increased funding. The depressed academic standards situation exists in all parts of the nation--not just in Florida. Simply to excuse it by arguments claiming that schools and colleges have to deal with more heterogeneous student populations

than ever before, that home television is the major culprit and that modern life is more complex than in earlier times in no way justifies educators for not succeeding in teaching the basic learning skills. Nor do such arguments excuse community colleges from requiring that their students learn adequate amounts of substantive material.

For almost two decades now the concept of "change" has been the overwhelming rallying cry which was to improve teaching, especially at the community college level. Classrooms the nation over have adopted incredible amounts of innovative procedures of all types, including self-paced learning strategies, non-punitive grading systems, massive use of audio-visual materials, student-directed curricula, open classrooms, independent study, individualized instruction, role playing, simulation--games--the list is too long to include but a few. Yet in that same period we find seriously declining academic achievement scores along with increasing levels of academic grade inflation. Some of these innovative methods may have offered some benefit to the learning process under special circumstances. Yet none seems to have produced the great improvement in education which their overly optimistic supporters have constantly promised. Many of the latter have argued that their innovative ideas were really excellent and would have done much to improve classroom teaching. The blame, they often claim, rests with the teachers who have employed them and who often have lacked the skills to make them yield maximum results. To this response one might

wonder how much criticism should be put on instructors using some of these innovations and how much lies with the methodologies themselves.

Granted that some innovative teaching devices may have helped in some instances to improve teaching, an inordinate number of others apparently have not--and may even have had a deliterious effect. In many instances concepts such as non-punitive grading and academic grade inflation may have contributed to declining academic standards. Simply to certify that disadvantaged or underprepared students have passed courses when they may not even have come close to such levels of attainment does both the educational institution and the student a disservice.

Roger Sipher of the State University of New York at Courtland and a past recipient of the chancellor's award for excellence in teaching asks whether the time has come to end compulsory education. He maintains that in the present educational crisis critics of American education who believe students are blameless may be wide of the mark. Says Sipher:

> These critics blame the teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, colleges of education, even something as vague as 'the system'--in short, everything or everyone but the students. What they fail to realize is that by ignoring the role the students have played in destroying educational standards they are undermining attempts at sensible educational reform.

If Sipher's suggestion were to be taken seriously, it would undoubtedly have an important effect on the community colleges as well as in the public schools. While it might temporarily play a minor role in reducing some two year institutions' enrollment

figures, it would probably have an even greater impact in upgrading academic standards at that level and would help to restore greater respect for the entire educational process. Sipher's main argument maintains that permissive attendance policies and lower academic standards have simply encouraged students in the public schools and even at higher levels to do less work, especially since the latter have long realized that a diploma would be forthcoming in most instances anyway.

As annual expenditures for community colleges and for public education in general are at an all-time high, the public is now in a mood to hold teachers and administrators accountable for results, or lack of them, in student learning.[3] The somewhat valid excuse that the nation's socio-economic problems are more complex than in earlier decades does not satisfy these critics. Results are what count.

Yet there are many rational strategies that can be employed to improve the present unhappy situation in the classroom. For one, let us understand that adding even more innovative teaching methodology will not in itself do much to alleviate the present situation. Few people are opposed to reasonable change in any human endeavor providing that such activity leads to improvement in what already exists. Yet catching students' imaginations by depending upon open classroom teaching, role playing and simulations as such may not materially guarantee comprehensive and improved learning when the need is for increased substantive knowledge and learning skills.

L. Patton Davis of University College of the University of Cincinnati asked twenty-two respondents who attended her session at the Community College Social Science Convention in Atlanta, Georgia to complete a questionnaire. In response to the question "have you tried teaching by means of simulations and role playing," most of the answers were positive. Yet virtually all of these respondents, who were teachers in community colleges, further explained that the benefits from such teaching strategies had been either negative or at best minimal. Most of the respondents maintained that the lecture-discussion teaching format, at least for the bulk of their teaching methodology, had ordinarily proven superior by any reasonable measure they could devise.[4]

The "open door" admissions philosophy of the community college is a valid one and can work to the advantage of all concerned if this term is not translated into a lowering of academic standards, as is so often the case. Community college instructors can meet the needs of heterogeneous student bodies if they present course material in a highly organized and moderately paced manner. If the teacher speaks clearly, in terms understandable to most students in the class, slowly enough so that people of less than average ability can take notes, reasonable learning will occur in general education courses. The instructor should be willing to respond to questions, no matter how unsophisticated they may be. All important, to repeat, are the teacher's clarity of presentation, explanation of the material and moderation of pace. Before he begins his presentation it is often useful for the

instructor to include an outline on the blackboard of the day's discussion. This is usually preferable to giving each student a study guide, which too often is simply a sample of a forthcoming test. Further, the use of an outline on the blackboard requires each student to become immediately involved in the subject matter since he must copy it into his notebook. The "handout" study guide does not require such student involvement and may, therefore, become a crutch rather than an aid to learning. Yet in this situation each instructor should employ whichever method he prefers.

Mellander maintains that if the community college wishes to retain or regain public trust it should not, as is so often the case, "allow students to coast along without written assignments, living in a world of computerized short answer examinations." He is emphatic that they not be allowed to foster grade inflation or a "when I feel like it" attendance policy.[5] He explains how he reinstated a realistic grading system at Passaic County Community College in 1975 after the college had been allowed to drift with few real standards by saying:

> The institution of a realistic grading system along with a new probation and suspension policy gave the faculty the necessary authority to evaluate students' work and achievements. It also gave students themselves a far greater challenge than many had faced before, an opportunity to consciously develop habits that would lead to success.... Hard work, self discipline and dedication should be characteristic hallmarks of all colleges. Education is a serious business.[6]

The fact that the vast majority of community college students are average or less than average in academic preparation

and ability should not necessitate myriad classes based on ability levels of students. While some extremely high risk students might reasonably be placed in special remedial classes, most students, whether academically good or less than average, should remain in the same sections in general education courses. A few honors classes for students of truly superior ability might also be offered. What ought to be avoided, however, is the establishment of large numbers of remedial classes which offer credit similar to that which is yielded by regular ones. The former, as often constituted, have lower achievement requirements and expectations than standard classes. Yet they usually certify that their students have received credit also, credit which can be used for transferring to upper division institutions in many instances.

It is vitally important that classroom testing be both of the subjective as well as of the objective variety; that it not be limited to the objective format alone (multiple-choice, completion, true/false, etc.) as is so often the case in community colleges. Hour long classroom tests which include both subjective and objective formats are probably the best type; each section of a student's test can thus be compared on an individual basis. Yet alternative objective and subjective type tests may also be suitable. For too many years instructors of general education courses have frequently employed objective tests exclusively. While such test formats do allow for almost instant scoring and thus save the instructor many hours in grading time,

they do not offer students the badly needed opportunity to present their substantive knowledge and thought processes on paper Instructors will not be overworked in grading papers if perhaps as little as one third of the test material is subjective in nature--with perhaps two thirds of the objective variety. While objective testing can examine more individual areas of knowledge, subjective responses can give the teacher many insights about a student's knowledge not available in objective test procedures. In the real world of occupations many of the better jobs require substantive knowledge expressed in written form, not simply an ability to discriminate from several alternatives as represented in multiple choice responses.

A study I made recently compared the relationship between objective and subjective classroom tests and student evaluations of their instructor. The results of this investigation clearly indicated that three quarters of the students will rate their instructor higher if he employs all-objective tests exclusively rather than subjective ones or a combination of both. Yet at the same time a majority of the students tested admitted that the combination objective-subjective type tests offered a more realistic judgment of student achievement levels than did all-objective tests.[7] This study also clearly showed that the correlation between the objective and the subjective sections of each student's test was not so great as one might assume. This would suggest that all-objective tests may not be so valid as "combination"-type tests. So for these and for other reasons

already mentioned, there is a strong case in support of both subjective as well as objective examinations. The serious erosion of student writing skills during the past fifteen or more years further corroborates this position.

Studies have ben made in recent months indicating that moderately traditional teaching strategies yield better results than many innovative ones--even for disadvantaged and high risk students. Mellander's experience at Passaic County Community College, noted above, states that 468 students at that institution, almost one third of the entire student body, were either suspended or placed on probation when realistic grading was reintroduced at that institution in 1975. He explained that the previous "non-punitive" grading system--no D's, no F's--had been a proven failure. As a result of the new and more stringent grading formula, said Mellander, Passaic Community College "risked serious financial constraints, public animosity and widespread distortion of our purpose and goals." But he pointed out at that "these decisions were preferable to maintaining an 'educational charade.'"[8] The result of this change, however, was that enrollments soon afterwards increased, the faculty supported the decisions, and the public soon offered widespread support. The students reacted very favorably, and"the college is now on its way to establishing an academically sound institution."[9]

The public schools and the community colleges can succeed in educating most students at reasonable levels of achievement in general education if greater emphasis is placed on basic

learning skills and on substantive knowledge. It is not true, as some critics would have us believe, that such a thrust would lead to elitism in education; that the high risk and disadvantaged student would thus be forgotten. Most students are inspired after they have made a real effort in their studies and when their learning levels increase. Improving students' learning in the affective domain at the expense of the cognitive, as has often been the case during the past decade and more is not the way to upgrade institutions of education.

Too often, says Harvard's David Reisman, "public schools give in to teenagers' desires to be entertained." He claims that, consequently, homework and course requirements have gone down while grades have gone up. As a result, says Reisman, "26 states have now passed laws requiring competency exams, and Congress has also begun hearings on whether there should be a nationwide competency exam."[10]

The valid issue of demanding at least reasonable academic standards has, unfortunately, become enmeshed in the civil rights controversy. Innumerable cases have been brought before the courts arguing that mandating standardized and other types of test performance is simply a strategy which will do harm to the educational opportunities of disadvantaged and minority groups in this country. Yet James J. Sherman of the State University of New York at Albany sees the situation otherwise. He maintains that those people who wish to help the disadvantaged student would be wiser to stress, not disparage, intellectual values and

academic standards. Sherman claims that there is a strong correlation between student achievement and teachers' scores on short (30 word) vocabulary tests; that upgrading teacher academic skills and knowledge would especially benefit minority students. Says Sherman:

> Civil rights rhetoric often disguises a revolt against rationality and competitive ideals. Many English teachers now argue in effect that to insist that minority students acquire skills prerequisite to professional careers is to improve middle class values, thus depriving children of their cultural heritage. The learned who stress cultural authenticity above literacy are like the wealthy who stress purity of heart above worldly goods. The likely effect of not even trying to teach the 3 R's is well understood by the majority of black parents. If there is to be a greening of America, they would like to have their children counted out.[12]

Lest it be thought that all minority leaders are in the forefront for lowering academic standards and for opposing competency testing, the Reverend Jessie Jackson, a black leader from Chicago, and Kenneth Clark, the eminent psychologist and black leader, have been outspoken in their demand for higher academic standards in the schools and colleges. Jackson maintains that many students are falsely certified, that they are functionally illiterate at graduation from secondary school and that they are passed off as functionally literate.[13] Clark says:

> Without apology I could say that I am a traditionalist.... Any theory that a student shouldn't be pressured, that he shouldn't be frustrated, imposes on the child the most horrible form of self-deception.[14]

Improving academic standards in the public schools and colleges, including community colleges, would benefit high risk and

traditional students alike. Employers would again give respect to high school and college diplomas. They would become more willing to hire these people because graduation would represent respectable academic and career levels of achievement. One of my previous investigations concerns faculty views on curriculum and instruction at five different community colleges. This study indicates that approximately three quarters of the randomly selected respondents (74 in all) believed that phenomena such as academic grade inflation, erosion of academic standards with the consequent reduced emphasis on cognitive learning may have, to a substantial degree, been the consequence of many unproven innovative teaching strategies, which have not lived up to the promises of their optimistic and overly zealous sponsors.[15]

In conclusion, it should be realized that the serious problems in education that have been discussed will not disappear as a result of the introduction of still more innovative teaching strategies. As already mentioned, a few of these methods on occasion may be of some benefit in specific instances. Yet all of the "hardware" and "software" in the world will not insure that students subject to their offerings will be materially better served that those who are taught by more conservative methods. Well prepared, demanding and dedicated instructors who carefully and slowly present subject matter in classes of average and mediocre community college or public school students are the bases around which real learning and understanding can be achieved. Of course, limited amounts of audio-visual materials

and innovative methodology have a place in the classroom if such materials and teaching strategies are recognized for what they are--secondary aids which may to a degree in some instances complement the main strategies for learning--accomplished teaching and willing students. People become willing students when they notice that their teachers are serious and hardworking, willing to grade written assignments and tests. Such students realize that they are actually learning substantive material and not simply that which appears in the affective domain of learning. These students will often become inspired to higher levels of achievement; they will better be able to relate their learning to the real world of work and study. They will learn to discipline themselves rather than always to depend on the "entertainment" that goes on in the classroom. They will gain self-respect for the knowledge and skills they have obtained in an institution that requires solid achievement rather than permitting an accommodation to students' undisciplined inclinations.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Gustavo A. Mellander, "Community Colleges Must Abolish Tinsel Diplomas," Chronicle of Higher Education (November 28, 1977), p. 15.

[2]Ibid.

[3]"Why Teachers Are Under Fire," U.S. News and World Report, (December 12, 1977), p. 50.

[4]L. Patton Davis, unpublished study, "Teaching Methodologies of Community College Faculty Members"; panel session at the Community College Social Science Convention, Atlanta, Georgia (November 4, 1977).

[5]Mellander, p. 15.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Chester Handleman, "The Relationship Between Objective and Subjective Classroom Tests and Student Evaluations of Their Instructor," College Student Journal (Spring, 1977), p. 28.

[8]Mellander, p. 15.

[9]Ibid.

[10]"Education," Time (November 14, 1977), p. 75.

[11]Malcolm J. Sherman, "Anti-Intellectualism and Civil Rights," Change (December, 1976), p. 39.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Jessie L. Jackson, "Nation Must Demand Excellence in Schools," Miami Herald (April 21, 1977), p. 10.

[14]"Back to the Basics in the Schools," Newsweek (October 21, 1974), p. 91.

[15]Chester Handleman, "Faculty Members Support Back to Basics," Community College Review, North Carolina State University, Winter, 1977, pp. 42-49.

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